

Recruiting a Michigan Heritage Conservation Corps

Need and Rationale

Although several statewide Michigan professional organizations have examined the condition and preservation of parts of the state's heritage collections, Michigan does not have the comprehensive information essential to building statewide institutional, stakeholder and funding support to make collections care a true priority. We know, for example, that in 1998 only 16% of the 218 libraries, museums, historical societies and archives responding to a survey concerning archival collections had a written disaster plan (Council of State Historic Records Administrators, *Where History Begins*). Only 41% had collections or acquisition policies. We know that a 2004 survey of local governments found historic records in "attics, basements, jail cells, sheds, firehouses, historic village buildings, bathrooms, closets, pole barns, vaults, safes, off-site contractor facilities, garages, boiler rooms, old school houses, warehouses, a cemetery chapel, a beach front pump house, parking ramps and underground storage facilities" (Michigan Historic Records Advisory Board, *Michigan's Local Government Records Are in Danger*).

The Michigan Museums Association (MMA) believes that creating a white paper on Michigan's collections at risk is the first step towards achieving the third and fourth goals identified in the Heritage Health Index Report: helping collecting institutions justify dedicating resources to collections care and marshalling public and private support for collections care.

Though Michigan lacks a comprehensive statewide assessment of collections conditions, it has a great deal of experience in working with collecting organizations of all sizes in locals from the Detroit metropolitan region to the remote mining location communities of the Upper Peninsula. MMA proposes a method of producing Michigan's white paper that will engage a volunteer corps of committed people in the field ready to turn words into action on behalf of Michigan's heritage collections. Four principles are key to success:

- Engaging local leadership in all parts of the state
- Face-to-face contact between small/all-volunteer organizations and professionals
- Providing an easy-to-accomplish first step as part of the process
- Building on existing national programs

The first thing our extensive experience has taught us is that Michigan collecting institutions know that they need to provide better care for their collections and seek education about how to do so. For example, in 1992, when the Michigan Museums Association (MMA) decided to redefine its audience base to include small and all-volunteer museums, it turned to a study by Michigan State University museum studies graduate student Jackie Carr that identified more than 300 such museums and their greatest self-identified need, knowing how to take care of their collections. With the help of an IMS grant, MMA used a steering committee including large and small museums and a professional curator and consulting conservator to create the **ABCs of Collections Care** program—a workshop that continues to be offered nearly every year, attracting 20 to 30 participants at each session. The experience also illustrated the great diversity of collections preservation conditions and challenges found in Michigan—when curators from larger organizations began talking about preventing infestation, a steering committee member from an all-volunteer museum admitted she thought the conversation was going to be about squirrels and rabbits, not insects. Finally, MMA's experience has reinforced the value of white papers in gathering opinion and generating results. For instance, when MMA pioneered a white

paper on the impact of museums on Michigan's economy, it led to the creation of a cultural tourism program within Travel Michigan in the Michigan Economic Development Corporation.

A few years later, a Michigan State Historical Records Advisory Board (MSHRAB) regrant program demonstrated the value of face-to-face contact with professionals. That program, supported by an NHPRC grant, included self-evaluation workshops, one-day visits and reports by professional archivists, and grants to deal with identified problems. Most of the priority problems concerned basic collections care—security, climate control, and intellectual control. The program evaluations made clear that the organizations served—historical societies, museums and libraries with archival collections—placed the highest value not on the grants received, nor on workshops, but on the chance to have professionals examine their collections and help them apply the theory of the workshops to their unique situation. The process also proved to be an excellent opportunity for mid-level professionals to experience leadership.

MMA has confirmed the value of the personal connection with its **Conversations with Colleagues** program that links volunteer professionals with small organizations. The mentoring empowers action and enhances the desire for continued improvement. It also fosters long-term relationships between the mentor and the mentee in many cases.

Part of the success of the face-to-face contact clearly comes from the desire of all collecting organizations to go beyond theory and take action. The **ABCs of Collections Care** program, created with funding from IMLS, provides materials for workshop participants to use. The reports from both the archives program and the **Conversations with Colleagues** program focus on establishing priority action steps.

National professional organizations are setting the standards for collections care through programs such as the American Association of Museum's accreditation and museum assessment programs, the IMLS funded on-line Basics of Archives care provided by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), the graduated standards program now being developed by AASLH with IMLS support, and the Council of State Archivists Pocket Response Plan (PreP) template. MMA believes that by combining our information collecting with information sharing, we can make sure Michigan organizations are taking advantage of what is available to them.

The Planning Process

Our proposal is to create a Michigan Heritage Conservation Corps that reaches out into every part of the state. Our products will be:

- Regional organization and gatherings of collecting institutions for learning, assessment of collections and their needs, and action plan brainstorming
- Completed Pocket Response Plans in the hands of staff and volunteers of 300 collecting institutions (a significant step towards the Heritage Health Index goal of collecting institutions developing emergency plans)
- Established personal connections between museum, library and archival professionals and each local collecting group
- A Michigan White Paper that serves as a call to arms for collections care, including a plan for collective action in support of our heritage collections
- A marketing strategy for sharing the white paper with stakeholders and resource providers in both the public and the private sectors

We believe our process will create a sustainable platform from which to launch a commitment to heritage conservation that:

- Relies on empowerment rather than bureaucracy and forms;
- Promotes attainable action rather than theory;
- Builds on existing structures and programs rather than creating new ones;
- Is inclusive of all levels of experience and resources from the start.

At the heart of the process is a Steering Committee representing large, medium, small and all-volunteer museums, archives, historical societies and libraries. It will include at least one foundation representative with a track record of heritage support and one legislative representative with a similar commitment in order to engage stakeholders and future resource providers from the start. The Steering Committee will create the format and content for the local meetings. It will advise on all materials prepared for the meetings and on the content of the White Paper.

Key to our success will be approximately 45 Local Coordinators recruited from libraries, museums and archives in both peninsulas. These professionals will be asked to organize the local gatherings, recruit collecting institutions to participate, and follow up with the collecting institutions on completing the Pocket Response Plans and providing information for the White Paper. We will offer each local coordinator an honorarium of \$300 in recognition of the leadership role (and work) they are being asked to assume. Where possible, the Heritage Conservation Corps will work through already existing networks to identify coordinators and participants. MMA's **Regional Links** program, which supports networks of small museums working within the same region, is one such resource. The northwest Michigan regional link group, for example, hosts meetings of up to 45 professionals and volunteers. It has developed a brochure illustrating the locations and basic information of its sites and is working on creation of a website. It is poised to make the most of this project.

The Professional Teams at the local meetings will consist of 15 teams comprised of one person with experience in three-dimensional collections and one in library/archival collections. These individuals will attend training once the steering committee has set the format and content for the local meetings. The project will support their travel; and each member will receive an honorarium of \$300.

The local gatherings will include:

- A workshop on the importance of collections care with concise handouts that can be used with boards and resource providers concerning what can happen if collections are not appropriately cared for and emergency plans are not made. Instructions and materials to create the Pocket Response Plans developed by the Council of State Archives (modified to serve museums as well as archives) will be part of the workshop. When collecting institutions complete their PReP templates, their local coordinators will give them their envelopes. A pdf file and generated image of these plans is attached.
- A representative visit of diverse sites organized by the local coordinators that will allow the professional team to begin assessing the content and condition of heritage collections in the region.
- A public meeting or press conference with a call to action.

After the gathering, each collecting institution will be expected to complete its PReP template and provide some basic information identifying their most important collections, the rationale for the selection, and their priorities for caring for those collections. The Local Coordinators will have digital cameras for the collecting institutions to use in visually documenting the collections and their care. Together, each Professional Team and Local Coordinator will complete a report on what they observed and collected that will be given to the local collecting institutions and the Steering Committee.

The Project Assistant (expected to be a museum studies graduate student) will keep tabs on preparation for the local gatherings and provide follow-up, making sure that all participants are clear on arrangements, travel documentation, and other administrative matters. This person will also remind all involved of their deadlines and obligations and add information to the project web page, which will be accessible from the MMA home page (www.michiganmuseums.org). The Project Coordinator, will chair the Steering Committee meetings, prepare drafts of materials, lead the Professional Team training and write the White Paper.

The White Paper will demonstrate the content, public value and condition of heritage collections in Michigan. It will provide prioritized actions that can be implemented at the local, regional, and state levels, taking into account geographic and resource differences. It will call all Michiganians to take action to preserve their heritage. It will include an Executive Summary for use with stakeholders and resource providers as well as more detailed information. The Executive Summary will be printed in quantity. The longer report will rely largely on electronic publication.

A Marketing Committee drawn from some of the larger institutions will create a statewide and local marketing plan to ensure that the Executive Summary of the White Paper generates the attention desired. The project will also maintain an open-access web page on the MMA website (www.michiganmuseums.org) reporting progress and findings and be covered in statewide professional organization newsletters and annual meetings.

We are committed to ensuring strong representation at all levels of the project from archives, libraries and museums.

Project Resources: Budget and Personnel

The Michigan Museums Association will be the lead organization for this project. It will provide fiduciary and grant management services and recruit the participation of other statewide organizations including the Michigan Alliance for Cultural Conservation, ArtServe Michigan, the Michigan Archival Association, and the Johnson Center for Philanthropy & Non Profit Leadership at Grand Valley State University. The Michigan Historical Center is the state agency involved in the project. The Center includes the Michigan Historical Museum and the Archives of Michigan, which leads the Michigan State Historical Records Advisory Board.

Teresa Goforth, Executive Director of the Michigan Museums Association, will provide grant management, serve on the Steering Committee, supervise the project assistant and attend selected gatherings. Teresa has led the MMA for nearly five years, building on her background as a small museum director. In addition, for the past four years, Teresa has worked with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service (SITES) and the Federation of State Humanities Council on the Museum on Main Street Project, training small museums around the country to develop

humanities programs and to engage in best museum practices as they prepare to host a SITES exhibition in their rural communities. In 2007, Teresa developed a workshop titled *Exhibit Design for Small Museums* for SITES and is presenting it to small museums around the country.

Timothy Chester, Director Emeritus of the Public Museum of Grand Rapids, will be the Project Coordinator. He will coordinate the intellectual content of the project. Tim led the MMA project creating the ABCs of Collections Care, is a past president of MMA and on the board of the Association of Midwest Museums. He brings experience facilitating museum groups in planning, and extensive experience in collections management, collections care in historic structures, risk management, and the creation of storage and access facilities for collections.

Sandra Clark, Director of the Michigan Historical Center, will serve on the Steering Committee. Sandra lead the MSHRAB regrant project, served on the ABCs of Collections Care steering committee and the team that created the BASICS of Archives course. She just concluded a term on the board of the Council of State Archivists and is a past president of MMA and AASLH. She also brings professional experience in publications and marketing.

Because we believe that a key to sustainability is the involvement of Michigan foundations in the long-term care of Michigan's heritage collections, we are seeking \$40,000 in matching funds for the project. We hope that ground level involvement in the project will result in opportunities to present the White Paper conclusions to Michigan's foundation community.

Michigan is a geographically large state. Its complex geography, separated by massive inland freshwater seas, complicates travel and communication. (It takes as long to drive from Detroit to Copper Harbor as to drive from Detroit to Washington, D.C.) Michigan's current economic stress makes it particularly imperative that we speak out now about the value of our work and the support needed to accomplish it.

Normally, our professional organizations rely on volunteers and travel reimbursement to make programs like the **ABCs of Collections Care** and **Conversations with Colleagues** work. For this project, we are seeking sufficient funding to provide honoraria for those professionals who take on the added work associated with this project. While the sums will not be compensation for the hours they give, they will recognize their work, professionalism and time. We will make every effort to keep travel costs in check, asking teams to travel together and serve two communities if they are going to northern Michigan. We will ask our hosts to find donated meeting room space and charge a small fee for food if it is necessary. Steering Committee travel will be used only where air travel or overnight stays are unavoidable.

We also know from experience that our effort to touch every corner of our state will involve a great deal of administrative coordination and have built into our budget funds for a Project Assistant who will work under the direction of MMA and the Project Coordinator.

Michigan's statewide cultural organizations have formed the Michigan Cultural Alliance, of which MMA is a member. We believe the White Paper and the public interest generated by this project will give the Alliance the facts, the grassroots organization, the attention, and the case to move forward in obtaining private and public support for the care of our heritage collections.